

Monmouthshire Select Committee Minutes

Meeting of Performance and Overview Scrutiny Committee held at County Hall, Usk - Remote Attendance on Thursday, 15th December, 2022 at 10.00 am

Councillors Present

County Councillor Alistair Neill (Chairman)
County Councillors: Ian Chandler, Tony Kear, Paul Pavia, Peter Strong, Ann Webb, Laura Wright, Sue Riley, Su McConnel

Also in attendance County Councillor Martyn Groucutt (Cabinet Member)

APOLOGIES: County Councillor Jill Bond

Officers in Attendance

Hazel Ilett, Scrutiny Manager
Robert McGowan, Policy and Scrutiny Officer
Richard Jones, Performance Manager
Sharon Randall-Smith, Head of Achievement and Attainment

1. Declarations of Interest

None.

2. Public Open Forum

No submissions were received.

3. Welsh Education Strategic Plan

Sharon Randall Smith presented the report and answered the members' questions with Cabinet Member Martyn Groucutt.

Challenge:

I see a reference to new Welsh medium school in Monmouth and the report highlights resource implications. Is the project fully protected? Given the current budgetary position, might it be subject to savings being made?

We are very mindful of current position. In order to establish the seedling class, we need funding from Welsh Government which stands at 100%, but we also need to consider the revenue costs of running the school, which will be initially small for the first few years as we grow the seedling, but these will increase. That said, pupils that choose Welsh medium education may not chose English medium, so we expect it to balance itself out. It's something we need to be mindful of going forward.

If we compare Monmouthshire with neighbouring authorities such as Torfaen which has a waiting list, we are catching up and I wonder if the fact that we have a school in special measures may be a deterrent for parents?

Cabinet Member: In our 2 existing Welsh medium schools, we have full nursery provision. With the new seedling coming on in Monmouth that will offer full wrap around care, this should be a positive inducement for parents to put children into Welsh medium education. Education is of lifelong importance, so taking into account the full pre-school offer, this will compare favourably with our neighbouring authorities.

In relation to the WESP forum, have they received the action plan? What issues were raised and have those been mitigated, in terms of how realistic the ambition is?

The action plan has been taken to the forum and they contributed to the final version, along with a representative from Welsh Government, ahead of the plan being reported to Welsh Government. It's important to note that the WESP is ours and the forum were heavily engaged. They were pleased to see the ambition but recognised the need for a baseline.

The report highlights the workforce issues and refers to the national workforce plan being developed by Welsh Government. Is there a further update on that? And in developing and expanding provision in schools, developing the Welsh proficiency of staff in primaries from the intermediate level to the advanced level is a relatively small step and we have quite a lot of staff who can be developed at that level, but in terms of secondary school staff proficiency, developing staff from a very basic level of proficiency is a much more significant task, so how are we going to work with colleagues to develop higher levels of proficiency?

We are working alongside the central services and have undertaken a staff survey to determine capacity and capability to develop a comprehensive plan to support and develop staff proficiency. We work closely with the Education Achievement Service to develop language proficiency at both primary and secondary level. We know the information in the plan is baseline and we are aware of a greater number of Welsh speakers than is reflected, so we will be following that up. We have also found Welsh Government's 1 year sabbatical programme has been very successful and we have fed that back to them to ask if the scheme can be extended. It has enabled staff to not only develop their proficiency but to return to the school with ideas as to how to embed Welsh into the school. If the same opportunities could be there for secondary, that would be beneficial. In terms of the continuum of English primary education to Welsh secondary education, there has been some interest, but it's some way off in the future.

What is our ambition for Welsh secondary education in the county? We currently work in partnership with neighbouring Torfaen, but is the ambition to develop our own provisions and if so, what would that mean for us financially?

Cabinet Member: At the moment Members will be aware that we secondary provision in Newport and Torfaen. We are in discussion with neighbouring authorities about future proposals, if pupil numbers increase. The important factors are the quality of the provision and the distance travelled. For example, for Monmouth, Abergavenny or Crickhowell pupils, travelling to Newport or Torfaen would be a long journey, so we are holding discussions with neighbouring authorities to consider what future provision might be needed in the north of the county, but to explain why it isn't an immediate priority, it's worth highlighting that in order for Welsh medium secondary education to be successful, we would need to deliver the whole range and to do that, we would need

pupil numbers to make it viable. It would be a requirement that the quality of provision be of a high standard and comparable to that of English medium. There would also be staffing implications, in relation to staff proficiency in Welsh and the home to school transport would need consideration. We are currently experiencing issues with home to school transport where we are struggling to find providers and are therefore using the Passenger Transport Unit, but this is an emerging problem, and it is therefore more complex when you take that into account. We will be reviewing home to school transport shortly, which includes considering transport to Welsh medium and faith schools to ensure those children are not losing out. So, we will see how the numbers of pupils in Welsh medium education grows, but the quality of provision and distance travelled are two important factors.

Provision of Welsh medium education is a fundamental right and is important in strengthening the language, but recognising the challenges we've spoken about at secondary level and fact we are border county, if we are looking to increase the level of Welsh speaking, how are we improving the quality of Welsh teaching in secondary schools? If lots of pupils coming to Monmouthshire schools are coming cross border, I'm concerned that Welsh classes may be viewed by pupils as a waste of time, so how are we trying to encourage the desire to speak Welsh amongst pupils and then ensuring our provision isn't patchy?

You are right that being border county has its challenges, but we are doing a lot of work to promote the benefits of bilingualism at a young age and how it's much easier to learn third and fourth languages if you have been bilingual at a young age. The WESP forum is promoting this and we are doing some filming in one of our schools. Whilst the filming would be of younger pupils, hopefully it will help secondary pupils to understand the importance of it. Schools are working with us to help them understand that lots of careers will require Welsh speaking abilities, but we also are looking at how to explain the wider benefits and the opportunities of speaking Welsh if they choose to live in Wales. We feel the new curriculum will also help.

Cabinet Member: Sharon has referred to the use of film and media and it will be important to show that it is a part of Monmouthshire life. In King Henry School 25 years ago, you wouldn't have heard a word of spoken Welsh, but it's very different now and the new curriculum will help. The cross-border element is important because the curriculum will be radically different to the education English children will receive, so it will be something for parents to consider – the new curriculum is focussed on young people being 'more thinkers and movers' than just 'recipients of knowledge' - that is the distinction. It's a very exciting time for education in Wales so we hope parents cross-border will choose to send their children to us.

In terms of convincing young people about the value of being bilingual, do you think the focus on job prospects may appeal more to parents than young people themselves? How are you tracking young people's views on the value about learning Welsh?

I understand your point about involving pupils and asking what they think and we are engaging with schools on this. Yes, we need to ensure they understand the value in terms of job prospects, but we also want them to enjoy speaking Welsh. Careers don't just start when education ends, we have the 'bring your parents to school day' and other initiatives where Welsh speaking is embedded.

Cabinet Member: historically, children were punished for speaking Welsh in school and Wales is now re-emerging and the language has a chance to blossom after years of repression.

We've talked about pupils coming cross -border to Monmouthshire schools but have we got any data on those doing the reverse?

It's an interesting question for a border county and often there is an ebb and flow to and from Monmouthshire over time, I don't believe it's as a result of the Welsh language or the curriculum, but they are going in very different directions now. We do have figures in our access unit that could indicate this but the reasons are often wide and varied and not always related to Welsh language.

The numbers at Chepstow for example have changed a lot with many more pupils joining, so the picture is positive.

In respect of the joint working with Torfaen and Newport, with every council growing its own numbers, are we keeping the situation under constant review?

Yes, we keep it under close review and look to ensure students in Welsh primary can transfer to secondary in Welsh medium and also into post 16 education in Welsh medium. Currently, we are thinking it will be 2028 before there are any pressures. We will need to see how the Monmouth school goes and we will need to wait a period of approximately 7 years to see the trends.

In terms of the Welsh provision for children with complex needs, particularly educational psychologists, what capacity is there within the consortia for specialist training to increase the number of Welsh speaking educational psychologists?

We are undertaking a baseline audit for additional learning needs (ALN) and we review ALN annually, but there will be a particular focus on Welsh. Training can be done through the local authority or the education consortia and all training is bilingual and online. At the moment, we do need to use some translators to fulfil our duty under the act, but as we develop our capacity at a secondary level, we are increasing the capacity for ALN too. It is a conundrum for us, but we always look for Welsh abilities in our recruitment.

I was interested in the recent report published nationally that compared the number of Welsh speakers over a period of about 5 years reporting a decline in the numbers and I'm concerned as to whether we have too much of a push rather than a pull and encouraging the desire to learn the language.

You are correct about the decline and your point is an interesting one, because it seems the decline is at the younger age bracket and there may be a piece of work for Welsh Government to do on that. I cannot give an answer specifically, but I take on board your point and I feel that as the language is strengthening in our county, that is a real positive and we must be doing something right. I can recall opening our first Welsh medium school, so we have come a long way and unlike Welsh heartlands where they may be more defensive about the language, here it does feel like we are doing this for the right reasons.

How confident are we that the census figures are accurate, because the questions were very simplistic and respondents could be from the age of 3 upwards, so in some cases, adults may be responding on behalf of children, so I'm concerned about the validity of responses to some of the questions.

I agree with earlier points about making Welsh seem meaningful to young people. I think pupils of lower attainment may be less easily convinced that those at a higher level of attainment.

In terms of the Welsh A level position in English medium schools, are the courses well subscribed? I'm concerned that saving initiatives may lead to the removal of courses?

I'm not aware of major concerns about the survey, but we are not counting the responses to the question "what does speaking Welsh mean to you?" for the reasons you have identified. Outcome 5 explains how we will work with partners on developing speaking and hearing the language in the wider context.

We have smaller numbers and courses are maintained, but we've learned a lot about distance learning during the pandemic and it may be that if we experience problems, we need to be more creative. There is also E-Ysgol which is very useful, but to reassure you that this is something we are aware of and will plan for, but we are hoping to increase the numbers over time.

Chairs Summary:

Thanks to the officers and the cabinet member for attending to the committee for their questions. The committee agreed to move the report.

4. Strategic Risk Register

Richard Jones and Hannah Carter delivered a short training presentation on risk management and answered the members' questions. The Chair reminded Members that it is the committee's role to satisfy itself with the approach that has been taken and that if the committee wished to scrutinise any risks in depth, the relevant Cabinet Member would be invited to a future meeting for scrutiny of that risk.

Challenge:

*Recognising that these are extraordinary times and that every council is approaching their strategic risk register in the same way, critically reevaluating the choices they make, looking at the 39 risks identified over a 3 year period, after 3 years of mitigations being put in place 23 remain high risk. This is something I find very concerning, given that the mitigations have already been built in. Please can we have a response from the senior leadership team on this. **Action: Richard Jones and Hazel Ilett.***

Your point about risk levels is a fair one. It's important that we correctly assess them and some of the factors relating to the risk may be outside our control, meaning that despite us putting in our own mitigations, they remain a high risk and the proportionate assessment is that these may not reduce. But we do need to consider the risk levels and whether we are doing enough to mitigate them if the risk level is still high. Some of

the mitigations may take time to work through and therefore take time to lower the risk level.

We are looking at this through the prism of the Local Authority and the risk that we may not be able to deliver services as we may wish to, but what we are not building in is the risk to service users if we are unable to deliver services to the standard we wish and therefore, what assessment has been undertaken of the risk to key service users and how would it affect their lives? It would be good for us to view it from the perspective of the service user rather than just the Council. Please could we ask for a response on whether we should do more to understand risk through the eyes of the service user.

Action Richard Jones and Hazel Ilett.

The strategic risk register does cover some of the impacts on people, but your point about this being a council risk register is taken. For example, for risk 11, which is decarbonisation and climate change, we've tried to capture ongoing community risk, as well as the risk to our own service delivery. For example, we work with the Gwent Public Service Board and some of the risks are shared across partners and communities.

Pages 53-54, the report begins stating that budgets have been reduced over several years and refers to budgets not being solvent, can you comment on that?

It's quite a specific question and one that would be more appropriate for the risk owner.

Action: Richard Jones and the senior officer

Recognising that the risk owners need to answer the detail, my question relates to where the risk level has changed as a result of mitigation, such as risk 4 on recruitment, where after mitigation, the risk remains 'possible'. The actions are things I would have hoped would be undertaken anyway, so what is the process about how those risks are assessed, do cabinet do it, do you do it, or is it the risk holder?

It's done by the risk owner, supported by us so that we can offer an objective view. The example relates back to the chair's question around whether risk levels change after risk mitigation and as some are outside of our control, sometimes the risk remains high despite mitigation, so when risk levels lower, it's usually as a result of our own mitigations and we have to make an informed judgement led by those responsible for the risk, taking on board the feedback from elected members and also the public.

In relation to risk 2 and the current financial situation and the risk that some services may become financially unsustainable, this is interesting language, given that many services are statutory and are not able to be stood down.

We try to reflect the issues that inform the risk and how we try to respond to them, how we plan and manage our budget and how we position the risk accordingly, identifying the reasons for the risk. We try to headline it as accurately as possible and give you greater context as to the detail behind the risk.

I'm interested in the interplay between the 'risk being the probability of bad things happening' and I'm thinking the probability of all of them happening is low whilst the probability of one of them happening may be high so my concern is how one impacts on another, such as resources.

We have to identify what the risks are but also how they link together, so that we understand how they impact on each other, but this is a live risk register, so we do need to think about how some of the major risks such as those you have identified impacts on exiting risks, possibly creating a new risk.

Chair's Summary:

Whilst many services are statutory, they can be mitigated and changed. One area for future consideration seems to be resources from the discussion we have held today, so we could invite the responsible officer and cabinet member, as this risk impacts on the delivery of everything else.

Recognising the document is a live document, it's the committee's wish to bring this back in 3 months' time, to allow the executive time to work through the mitigating actions. If Members have particular risks they would like to scrutinise, please highlight these so that we can invite the relevant portfolio holders. The committee agreed to move the report.

5. Performance and Overview Scrutiny Committee Forward Work Programme and Action List

Councillor Pavia highlighted that there may be a danger that the committee becomes scrutiny fodder and suggested the committee needed to shape its own forward work plan as it's theirs to dictate.

The Chair agreed that it's the purpose of the committee to add value to ensure the Council deliver better services to people and assist the cabinet in doing so. He suggested the committee may want to table the strategic risk register on a frequent basis, rather than once a year and focus on the perspective of the service user.

A Special meeting would be held on 25th January 2023 to scrutinise the budget proposals.

6. Cabinet and Council Work Plan

The forward work plan was noted. The chair reminded the committee that it's important to keep a close watch on the Cabinet and Council Forward Work, particularly in light of the strategic risk report that has been received today.

It was clarified that this committee is solely responsible committee for the scrutiny of risk, rather than the other scrutiny committees.

7. To confirm the minutes of the previous meeting

The minutes of 21st November 2022 were confirmed and signed as an accurate record.

8. Next Meeting: Special Meeting - 17th January 2023

The meeting ended at 11.46 am.

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